DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 210 733 CS 503 687

AUTHOR Freeley, Austin J.
TITLE How Much Should the Words of a Debate Proposition Predetermine the Debate Subject Matter?
PUB DATE Nov 81
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (67th, Anaheim, CA, November 12-15, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Credibility; *Debate; *Decision Making; Definitions; Higher Education; *Semantics; *Speech Communication

ABSTRACT

The committee that phrases the proposition for the national intercollegiate debates has a reasonably clear interpretation in mind when they phrase it. The next party to attempt to determine what the words of the resolution really mean is the affirmative team, which has a propensity to write a "squirrel" case that in one instance will find the negative team unprepared, and in a second instance can be sold to the judge as an acceptable interpretation of the resolution. Thus, it appears that the judge ultimately determines what the words of a proposition really mean by handing down a judgment when the teams debate topicality. However, the judge operates in the context of the consensus of the forensic community. At one time, this community was made up of strict constructionists who demanded and got what might be called a literal interpretation of the resolution. That consensus has shifted to a more permissive one. At present it would seem that the forensic community views the proposition as something that sets broad boundaries within which the affirmative team is encouraged to be as creative as possible. With this requirement, the debate proposition may have one meaning in a debate round, and quite a different meaning in public. The interests of the forensic community would be better served if they subscribed to a real-world interpretation of the words of the debate proposition. By doing so, the credibility of the debate will be enhanced. (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED210733

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

HOW MUCH SHOULD THE WORDS OF A DEBATE PROPOSITION PREDETERMINE THE DEBATE SUBJECT MATTER?

by

Austin J. Freeley, Ph.D.

Professor of Communications
Director of Forensics

John Carroll University
Cleveland, Ohio

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Austin J. Freeley

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Presented at the Annual Convention of the
Speech Communication Association

Anaheim, California

November 14, 1981

CS503687

The question before this panel, "How much should the words of a debate proposition predetermine the debate subject matter?" clearly raises the problem of defining terms--a problem that has confronted the human race since the day after language was invented.

Some forty years ago Irving J. Lee wrote of "The Ambiguous Word" in these terms,

"'Define your terms!' has in many quarters become a disruptive tactic, a useful way of breaking off an argument, something to be avoided since the very effort itself is an invitation to disagreement. Nevertheless, the theory and practice of definition have been the object of much study in spite of John Wilkins' assertion in 1668 that 'the business of defining, is amongest all others the most nice and difficult' and, perhaps because of C. I. Lewis' statement in 1946 that 'what are most commonly called definitions are a class of statements which are peculiarly liable to ambiguity.' And even when some word has been defined another issue must be faced: where does the process stop?

"The opening sentence of Chapter VI of the seventh edition of The Meaning of Meaning is the same as it was in the first: 'There is at present no theory of Definition capable of practical application under normal circumstances.'

"In the face of all this, it is still valuable to recognize that ambiguity, indefinitness, vagueness and equivocation are ever with us. We may, if sensitive to the possibilities of confusion, learn to curb the arrogance, the presumption that we necessarily know what we or others are saying. When we have become conscious of the danger, we may search for methods of prevention."[1]

Lee was a serious scholar of the problem he discussed in the passage just quoted and in his books and in papers before

conventions such as this one he advocated the study of General Semantics as a method of preventing ambiguity, indefiniteness, vagueness and equivocation.

Another writer set out the matter in playful prose more than a century ago:

"'But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument,"' Alice objected.

"'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean--neither more nor less.'

"'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'

"'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master--that's all.'"[2]

I submit that Lewis Carroll was right on target for today's panel--the essential question before us is: "Who is the master? predetermine--or determine--the subject matter of debate?"

Who is to

I shall propose an answer to these questions later, but first I shall turn to the two sub-sets we were asked to consider and see what we actually have done in recent years.

The first question the panel was asked to consider was: "Should the resolution narrow the change agency?" An examination of national intercollegiate debate propositions from 1961-1962 through 1981-1982 reveals the following:[3]

In two years or 9% of the time, "The United States" was identified as the change agency.

"The federal government" was identified as the change agency in 12 years or 57% of the time.

Some other entities were identified as the change agency in three years or 14% of the time. For example the '77-'78 proposition called for giving greater freedom to law enforcement agencies in the United States. The unstated change agency would be the federal, state, or local governments on some combination thereof.

No change agency was identified in four years or 19% of the time. For example, the '74-'75 proposition called for curtailing the power of the Presidency, but left it up to the affirmative to find or create a suitable agency. Interestingly enough, the proposition did not stipulate the Presidency of the United States. Despite this obvious loophole not one team that I know of proposed to limit the powers of the President of France or the President of IT&T. The reason for this will be considered later.

Turning now to the second question addressed to the panel: "Should the resolution identify the intended result?"

Identifying the intended result is not quite as objective as counting the change agencies. However I venture to suggest that most would probably agree with my conclusion that the intent was clearly identified in exactly one third of the resolutions and was not stated in the remaining two-thirds. Let me offer some examples.

In '63-'64 the debate proposition was, "Resolved: That the federal government should guarantee an opportunity for higher education to all qualified high school graduates." I recall judging one member of this panel in an elimination round at West Point that year and I think he and all those who remember that proposition will agree that the intended result was clear and that

the proposition was debated in a straightforward manner throughout the year--there were no "squirrels" that season.

Turning to a more recent proposition, in '79-'80 the debate proposition was, "Resolved: That the federal government should significantly strengthen the regulation of mass media communication in the United States." The general public no doubt viewed the intent of this proposition as seeking to reduce sex and violence on television. The forensic community, however, found other intents in the proposition. In preparing for NDT that year, my team identified and blocked approximately 100 variations of that proposition that they knew had been used by other participants in that tournament. And, of course, my team and other teams discovered still other "intents" in the proposition and wrote brand new cases for use at NDT. Indeed, this has developed into a specialized art form as in recent years it has become customary for the affirmative team in the final round of NDT to have a case specially prepared for use in that round alone.

So much for history, let us look to the future.

Should the resolution narrow the change agency? Yes, I believe it would be desirable to do so.

Should the resolution identify the intended result. Again, yes, I believe it would be desirable to do so.

My intended result in taking these positions is to attempt to significantly curtail the proliferation of squirrel cases with a view to allowing debaters to participate in a tournament with a reasonable chance of success without the necessity of researching an almost infinite variety of cases and without the necessity of carrying more pieces of luggage than they have hands. More seriously,

and more importantly, my intent is to have our debates conducted in such a way as to enchance the credibility of our educational activity when it is viewed by our professorial colleagues or the general public.

If the committee were to follow my recommendation would they achieve my intended result?

This, of course, leads directly to the question I posed earlier, who is the master? Who determines what the words in the resolution <u>really</u> mean?

In the first instance, the committee is the master. They phrase the proposition and undoubtedly have a pretty clear intent in mind at the time that they phrase it.

The committee's intent is supposedly re-enforced by the parameter statement--but only 41% of the forensic community think parameters should be universally binding.[4]

The next party to attempt to become master and determine what the words of the resolution <u>really</u> mean is the affirmative. The affirmative has a propensity to write a squirrel case which, at the risk of defining terms, I shall define as a case that in the first instance will find the negative unprepared and in the second instance can be sold to the judge as an acceptable interpretation of the resolution.

When meeting this sort of case the negative, of course, seeks to become master and prove that the affirmative is not debating the <u>real</u> subject of the resolution--that they are non-topical.

Thus it would seem that the judge is the real master--the one who ultimately determines what the words of the proposition

<u>really</u> mean by handing down a judgement when the teams debate topicality. In a debate the judge is a sovereign power. The decision of the judge is unappealable and irreversible. This would, at first glance, seem to be real mastery.

However, the judge (at least one who intends to stay in the business for any length of time) is under a very real restraint. The judge judges in the context of the consensus of the forensic community.

The forensic community was, at one time, made up of strict constructionists who demanded and got what might be called a literal interpretation of the resolution. That consensus has shifted to a more permissive one--today topicality is a debatable issue. Debatable, that is, with <u>some</u> real world contextual restraints. As I mentioned earlier the proposition on curtailing the powers of the presidency did not stipulate the Presidency of the United States. Coming as it did, however, in the aftermath of Watergate no team I know of chose to take advantage of that loophole and debate any other Presidency than that of the United States. Apparently teams perceived that such a squirrel would be unacceptable to the forensic community in that context.

To use the familiar parlance of debate, the problem before us is not a structural one--it is not the words of the proposition that are our primary concern. Rather the problem is an attitudinal one--how do we interpert the words of the proposition? Thus, I submit, that the real question before us is not "How much <u>should</u> the words of a debate proposition predetermine the debate subject matter?" but rather the question is, "How much does the

forensic community want the words of the debate proposition to predetermine the debate subject matter?"

At present it would seem that the forensic community views the proposition as something that sets broad boundries within which the affirmative is encouraged to be as creative as possible. Thus, while the affirmative is required to propose something about labor unions, or foreign military commitments, or mass media; that something need satisfy only the specialized requirements of the forensic community and is not required to meet the expectations of the university community or the public in general. The proof of this is simple. Probably all of us have had cases that enjoyed considerable success on the tournament circuit that we wouldn't dare let our teams use in a debate before a general campus audience or before a Kiwanis or Rotary club because we know the intent of the proposition, as perceived by these audiences, is something quite different from the intent that can be rationalized in a tournament round. Granted, the time will probably never come when there will be substantial audiences of non-debaters in tournament rounds. But is it a sound educational practice to have such a great dichotomy between what we do in debate rounds and what we do before public audiences? Should the debate proposition have one intent in a debate round and another, and quite different intent, in public? I suggest that the interests of the forensic community will be better served if we subscribe to a real-world interpretation of the words of the debate proposition. Even then, as Lee warned, the problems of ambiguity, indefiniteness, vagueness, and equivocation will still be with us. However, by enforcing interpretations of the proposition

that will be accepted as prima facie reasonable by our professorial colleagues and by the business and professional community we will enhance the credibility of the educational activity in which we are engaged.

Footnotes

1. Lee, Irving J., The Language of Wisdom and Folly, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949) p. 135.

2. Carroll, Lewis (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson). Alice Through the Looking Glass, Chap. 5.

3. A list of national intercollegiate debate propositions may be found in Freeley, Austin J., Argumentation and Debate, 5th ed. (Belmont, California, Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1981) pp. 394-398.

4. "Results of CIDD Debate/Discussion Ballot," A July 15, 1981 mailing by the Committee.